

Co-Construction and Mutual Orientation in Conversation

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Introduction

Throughout the world on any given day, millions of conversations are being carried out in a multitude of languages. Whereas each conversation consists of the interaction between two or more people, each interaction is, in and of itself, a unique occurrence, created spontaneously by those involved. The ways in which people converse with each other offers a fascinating look at how we use language to communicate. This paper centers around data from a twenty-minute interaction in which, at surface glance, the interactants appear to be smoothly creating a conversation together. A closer look was taken to see if in fact this interaction was carried out as smoothly as it appeared to be, and if there were any salient features that might indicate this.

Research in discourse analysis suggests that interactants in a conversation can “work together” to co-construct an interaction, including mutually orienting toward a topic, projecting each other’s speech and finishing each other’s sentences (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki & Tao, 1996; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Hayashi & Mori, 1997; Jefferson, 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The concept of co-constructing dialogue was seen as a particularly interesting framework in which to look at the interactions seen in this data. Building upon the ideas of co-construction, mutual orientation and collaborative finishes, several examples from the data set are analyzed

in more detail. It is hypothesized that the two interlocutors in this interaction are in fact mutually orienting towards the topic of discussion and co-constructing their dialogue.

Data

The interactions chosen for analysis are segments taken from the beginning portion of a forty-minute conversation. The interactants are a Japanese woman in her mid-forties (M) and an American woman in her mid-thirties (A). They are quite good friends and have known each other for over ten years. Both participants are fairly bilingual in English and Japanese, although this interaction was carried out only in English. The conversation was both audio-taped and videotaped in the home of one of the interactants.

Pedagogical Background

In their work on discourse in Japanese, Hayashi and Mori (1997) look at the phenomenon of co-construction. In particular, their work deals with how an analysis of co-construction can provide a look at three salient features: 1) how interactants work to negotiate, achieve and display congruent understanding of the topics that are being discussed; 2) how alignment can result as a "contingent achievement" from the participants interactionally managing their talk; and 3) how co-construction can act as an organizational tool to assist with explanations in a multi-party conversation. It is this first feature, the idea of congruent understanding that is of particular relevance to the current data. Hayashi and Mori (1997) further elaborate on the idea of convergent understanding by raising the following points: 1) structural knowledge may help to facilitate the participants ability to coordinate their contributions; 2) participants are able to create a collective experience through co-construction; and 3) co-construction

can assist with negotiation of meaning when participants do not have equal prior knowledge of an event. They conclude that interactants are able to co-construct their participation through attention to the detail in structure in their interaction, which can assist with the organization of their interaction.

Clancy, et al. (1996) focus on a more specific feature of co-construction in their work on reactive tokens, which includes the phenomenon of collaborative finishes. As one type of reactive token, collaborative finishes are defined as utterances by a non-primary speaker that serve to finish a previous speaker's utterance. The collaborative finishes in their data tended to show completions of grammatically incomplete turn construction units (TCUs), which were seen as projectable.

Support for ideas discussed in Hayashi and Mori (1979) and Clancy et al. (1996) can be found in the seminal work done on the construction of turns by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). They describe turns as features that are determined interactively, which is not then merely a primary speaker setting the boundaries for a turn unit, but a "distribution of tasks", where the speaker may actually allow for the projection of a possible completion. There is also discussion of the idea of "recipient design", in which participants show their orientation to a topic through the way in which the talk is constructed and designed. Both of these concepts serve to reinforce the idea of co-construction and mutual orientation within the framework of an interaction between two or more participants.

Another type of mutual orientation is discussed by Jefferson (1973) in her research on the phenomenon of overlap. Her work indicates that interlocutors have the capability of "placing" their talk with precision. This can be manifested in several ways: 1) cases in which an interlocutor comes in at an appropriate time to complete a

speaker's yet incomplete utterance; or 2) an interlocutor tries to interject by saying the same thing at the same instant as the primary speaker. This supports the idea that even in an overlap situation, mutual orientation and projectability can be factors in an interaction.

An interactant's ability to contribute to a primary speaker's utterance is also dealt with in Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) in their work on assessment. They suggest that participants are able to "track" in great detail the emerging structure of the primary speaker's utterances. This also incorporates the idea of context, which Goodwin and Goodwin pair with utterances as "intrinsically dynamic". Even if a participant's projections prove to be inaccurate, their contributions indicate that they as recipients of the primary speaker's talk are still actively engaged in anticipating future events based on the limited information they have.

Analysis

In looking more closely at the data from the interaction, it was decided to focus more specifically on the ideas of co-construction and convergent understanding, as discussed by Hayashi and Mori (1997), collaborative finishes as defined by Clancy et al. (1996) and mutually oriented overlap, using Jefferson (1973) as a point of reference. Examples of all of these types of phenomenon can be found within the representative speech data samples.

Example One:

161 M: =I have not taken the (Utsube) line.

162 A: oh.

163 M: so. uh. it's a taxi. you can take a taxi from.=

164 A: =from Yokkaichi station. yeah.=

(Wedd03)

Example Two:

368 A: =yeah. it's really small.=

369 M: =ohhh.=

[

370 A: =really small. and uh. I mean? (.) maybe about the size of uh. (0.4) Phoenix? over there?

371 M: Phoenix, oh.

[

372 A: almost without the.

373 M: (0.1) the balcony.=

(Wedd03)

Both of these examples show features which fit with Clancy et al. (1996) definition of collaborative finishes. In both cases, the recipient finishes the utterance of the primary speaker, and both finishes are seen as projectable. Whereas Hayashi and Mori (1997) found the co-construction of syntactic units in Japanese to center around the contributions of a verb/predicate to the primary speaker's utterance, this is not the case in these English interactions. In addition to providing a noun at the end of the utterance, these examples indicate that both speakers are familiar with the locations being discussed, and are both oriented towards the topic.

Example Three:

479 A: =that's going to be another.=

480 M: =problem.=

481 A: =interesting situation.=

(Wedd03)

Example Four:

390 A: I went. when I went there. for this concert. it was ah.
 (.) oh maybe they had. forty people in there. it was
 quite crowded.

391 M: this concert that.=

392 A: =Tim did.

[

393 M: Tim sang. (.) okay.=

394 A: =with this other band.

(Wedd03)

As similar to the previous examples, these also show tendencies towards collaborative finishes, as defined by Clancy et al. (1996). They both demonstrate the completion of a not-yet-completed grammatical turn, and are both projectable. The difference in both of these examples, however, is that the primary speaker finishes the utterance again in a third turn after the recipient has already added a completion. In example three, this is done as a latched contribution, with the primary speaker using a different word than the recipient. In example four, the primary speaker overlaps with the collaborative finish of the recipient by repeating a portion of the initial finish. Example four also shows indications of a negotiation of the referent “it” which occurs at the latter part of line 390. As such, line 391 might be viewed as a request for confirmation, which the primary speaker provides in line 392 and which the recipient then overlaps the response in line 393.

Example Five:

006 M: =so, this is your day off.

007 A: this is the day I use for Tokyo (.) study=

[

008 M: study,

(Wedd03)

The overlap found in example five is seen as one as described by Jefferson (1973). It is projectable, and shows a mutual orientation to the subject matter as Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) discussed, the utterance and the context are “intrinsically dynamic” and indicate that the recipient is indeed closely engaged in the speaker’s talk.

Example Six:

125 M: =I may go with you. but I may come. hhha earlier. by
train.=

126 A: =I hav- you know. uh I’m. (.) gonna come back from
Tokyo.=

127 M: =that night.=

128 A: =that night. um I’m gonna try. and be back, (.) by, (.)
seven.

(Wedd03)

Example Seven:

129 M: =umhmm,=

130 A: =so I thought I might drive. (0.1)

131 M: straight.

(Wedd03)

Examples six and seven differ from Clancy et al’s (1996) collaborative finish in that the recipient’s contribution comes at the end of an already grammatically complete TCU. In both cases, the recipient is adding information onto what is provided by the primary speaker.

In example six, the third turn shows the primary speaker repeating the addition that the recipient made, raising the possibility that the utterance in line 127 is functioning as a clarification measure. The third turn (line 132) in example seven brings a total change of topic, so it is more difficult to assess what role clarification may play in line 131, but in both examples there is again evidence that the second speaker is orienting towards the talk of the primary speaker and following closely what the talk is about.

Example Eight:

263 A: =but we were figuring. that Tim and Toru haven't seen each other. probably in five years.=

264 M: =about the same time

[

265 A: yeah. it was the last time was here. at your house.

[

266 M: mm,

267 A: and that was. (.) well he said he remembered. (.) Tim ha had remembered seeing Ben. as a baby.=

268 M: =okay. so.=

269 A: =that must have been here.=

(Wedd03)

This last example is also not a collaborative finish, but does display co-construction by the two interactants. In taking a closer look at the example as a whole, the two participants appear to be negotiating a fact, in this case the location of where the two people being discussed had last met. In following the conversation from line 265, the primary speaker proposes an idea in line 265, supports it in line

267 and completes it in line 269. In coordination with this, the recipient contributes the “so” in line 268 that functions as the keyword for the conclusion in line 269. This particular example is interesting if viewed from the perspective of a sequence, as discussed by Jefferson (1973). Although looking more at structural sequences, Jefferson suggests that rather than isolating a single line of dialogue, an entire sequence may need to be looked at. Looking at the sequence in lines 263 through 269 helps give clarity to the way in which the two participants are co-constructing the logical conclusion to the negotiation occurring over the location being discussed. In this sequence, both interactants are orienting towards the problem discussed and work to conclude it together.

Discussion

Perhaps in a best-case scenario, the interlocutors in any given conversation are mutually engaged, mutually oriented towards the topic and towards the flow of the unfolding dialogue. One not need look far to realize that that is hardly the reality, but as seen in the data above, in addition to the work done by Hayashi and Mori (1997), Clancy et al. (1996), Jefferson (1973) and others, there are instances in which participants can work to co-construct a dialogue. The ways in which this can be accomplished are by no means limited to those discussed within the context of this paper, but the examples presented here are indicative of a larger trend that show that interlocutors are capable of mutually orienting towards each other in the course of an interaction. The salient feature of this data is that the interlocutors include an L1 and an L2 speaker. In the examples studied, both are participating in contributing recipient roles. This does not, therefore, limit the roles of the L1 speaker to the contributing interlocutor, as the role in fact switches between the two.

As Clancy et al. (1996) discuss in their paper, there are questions as to whether culture may play a role in the frequency of different types of conversational sequences, and if similar participants and topics may manifest different sequential organization when transposed to a different culture. To what extent are cultural values exhibited situationally, and to what extent are they specific to different conversational styles? Within the context of the current data, there are questions as to whether the fact that one of the participants was an L2 speaker had any effect on the number of collaborative finishes and mutually oriented overlaps, and if the frequency and type would change if the same participants were speaking in Japanese rather than in English.

The fact that we as human beings with the ability to communicate through language are capable of speaking “at” each other as well as “to” each other is testament to the wide variety of ways that language can be used to communicate. The different factors that go into our communicative styles as well as our “language makeup” is the foundation for an intriguing look at how we use language. The successes of mutually oriented, co-constructed interaction further provide us with a window as to how we are able to collaboratively speak “with” one another.

References

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Appendix 1

Discourse Transcript

Participants: Conversation between 2 friends

Amy: American female, mid-30s

Miki: Japanese female, mid-40s

Data Collection: Recorded on audio and video tape at Miki’s home by researcher. Transcript portion is a collection of segments taken 5 minutes into a 40-minute conversation.

Transcript Title: “Tim’s Wedding”

A: Amy

M: Miki

001 A: instead of that. um, (0.2) I have Tuesdays off. at the universities? (.) university. hhh=

002 M: =um,=

003 A: =so.=

004 M: =oh.=

005 A: =um.=

006 M: =so, this is your day off.

007 A: this is the day I use for Tokyo (.) study=

[

008 M: study,

009 A: =and then I pick the kids up early.=

010 M: =um,=

011 A: =from school. and I've been taking them over. to one of my
friends? um, an American?

012 M: um,

013 A: friend. who has kids the same age.

014 M: oh.

110 M: and uh, yeah. so it's this weekend?

[

111 A: mmmhmm.hmm.

112 A: yes. (0.1)

113 M: he? hha okay?=
114 A: =yes.=

115 M: =and uh?=
116 A: =uh, are you gonna go?=
117 M: =yes. I am.=
118 A: =oh you are.=
119 M: =I'd love to go.=
120 A: =oh. oh. that's good to know?=
121 M: =yes.=
122 A: = maybe we should go together. =
123 M: =yeah. but uh. yeah. I would like to go. (.) but um, I may
go by train. I may,=
124 A: =by train?=
125 M: I may go with you. but I may come. hhha earlier. by

train.=

126 A: =I hav- you know. uh I'm. (.) gonna come back from Tokyo.=

127 M: =that night.=

128 A: =that night. um I'm gonna try. and be back, (.) by, (.)
seven.=

129 M: =umhmm,=

130 A: =so I thought I might drive. (0.1)

131 M: straight.

154 A: so from the station. it's probably what. fifteen to twenty
minute taxi ride maybe?=
155 M: =okay?=
156 A: =maybe?=
157 M: =yeah.=
158 A: =yeah=
159 M: =he was saying something. like (Utsube) line. or,=
160 A: =oh.=
161 M: =I have not taken the (Utsube) line.
162 A: oh.
163 M: so. uh. it's a taxi. you can take a taxi from.=
164 A: =from Yokkaichi station. yeah.=
165 M: =that's good to know.=
166 A: =yeah. (.) and of course. the taxi driver. will know a faster
way. so.
167 M: (.) mm,=
168 A: =that's better.=
169 M: =mm,=

255 A: =well? we s- he came to the university festival.=

256 M: =right.=

364 A: almost. and he's going to have about forty people in there.
which means.

[

365 M: I think it's more than that. he said. uh his wife invited
thirty. ahend his. he has invited. (.) aabout fifteen and un.
he's thinking of inviting some more. uh. between twenty
and thirty. so there's going to be. in fact. and he said. "if
you want to sit down. I suggest you come earlier."

366 A: yeah. it's

[

367 M: is that? the kind of place.=

368 A: =yeah. it's really small.=

369 M: =ohhh.

[

370 A: =really small. and uh. I mean? (.) maybe about the size of
uh. (0.4) Phoenix? over there?

371 M: Phoenix, oh.

[

372 A: almost without the.

373 M: (0.1) the balcony.=

374 A: =yes.

375 M: oh that's small.=

376 A: =yes.=

377 M: =sixty people in there?

[

378 A: hhh hahahahaha

379 M: ohhhhhh.

[

380 A: it's a you go in. and there's a counter.=

381 M: =uhhuh?=
[

382 A: =and then there's a f- a little space for tables behind the counter. and then it kind of goes into another? room where there's another row of.=

383: M: [ohhh.

384 A: =chairs along the wall.=

385 M: =okay,=

386 A: =and then one? two? maybe three or four. tables over here.=

387 M: =mm,=

388 A: =but it's not that big.

389 M: oh.

390 A: I went. when I went there. for this concert. it was ah. (.) oh maybe they had. forty people in there. it was quite crowded.

391 M: this concert that.=

392 A: =Tim did.

393 M: [Tim sang. (.) okay.=

394 A: =with this other band.

395 M: right. ohh. okay? ahoho,=

396 A: =mmhmm,

397 M: well. yeah. mm,=

463 A: =so,=

464 M: =mm, well. I hope he? Jay goes then at least. thehhere are more people I know,

465 A: ahahahahaha

466 M: [Mayumi doesn't come until very late=

467 A: oh,=

- 468 M: =around ten o'clock.=
- 469 A: =oh=
- 470 M: =so.=
- 471 A: =oh=
- 472 M: =I don't know if I get to. stay that late. or (0.2) so yeah.
(0.2) so you have been to this place before.=
- 473 A: =ju:st once.=
- 474 M: =did you drive.=
- 475 A: =yes.=
- 476 M: =and uh. they have a place to park.=
- 477 A: =not much.=
- 478 M: =mm,=
- 479 A: =that's going to be another.=
- 480 M: =problem.=
- 481 A: =interesting situation.=
- 482 M: =yeah. so going there. I can take a taxi. but coming back.
I can call. a taxi.=
- 483 A: =umhmm,=
- 484 M: =mm okay. that's good.

Appendix 2

Transcription Conventions

(Based on Jefferson notation)

:	lengthening of the preceding sound
underline	change in amplitude
[overlapping utterances begins
]	overlapping utterances stops
(.)	brief pause (less than 0.2 seconds)
(0.2)	silence in tenths of seconds
=	latching

hhh	hearable aspiration
.hh	inhalation
()	material transcriber is uncertain about
“ ”	prosody indicating mimicry

Intonation Changes

.	final falling contour
?	final rising contour
-	cut-off of the current sound